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# MILTON NASCIMENTO

Alex Robinson on Brazil's enduring musical colossus

PORTRAIT ALEX ROBINSON

**M**ilton Nascimento is the Pelé of world music – a genius who rose from the poor and untutored of Minas Gerais in Brazil to become an innovator, pioneer and singer adored by millions. There is simply no one like him. His rich, complex, strikingly original harmonies and unusual melodic turns have made him a musicians' composer, counting Pat Metheny, Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter among his fans. Yet his songs have been recorded by almost as many artists as Jorge Ben or Tom Jobim. During the dictatorship [1964-1985] he was a greater

political activist than Caetano Veloso. And whilst *tropicalia* was at its height, Nascimento quietly and modestly invented an entirely new style of music – *musica Mineira* (simply the music of Minas Gerais).

"My story," he told me in a recent interview, "is a romance" – playing on the dual meaning of 'romance' in Portuguese (story and romance). When he was young, Nascimento's mother died in Rio and her employer, Lilia, sent him to live with another member of the family in Juiz da Fora. "It was terrible for me. I couldn't eat or do anything I was so grief-stricken. I just used to sit in the doorway of

the house for days on end waiting – I don't know why – for a green car to arrive. Then one day Lilia – who was still living in Rio – came to find me in Juiz da Fora. I remember that I was sitting in the doorway feeling very bad. And when I saw her green car draw up on the other side of the road, I tried to run across the road, but I was so weak I fell over. She came rushing across the street and picked me up in her arms. My *Pietà* – saving my life and taking me to Três Pontas to live with her and her family."

Três Pontas is a tiny town lost in the rugged hills of Brazil's most lyrical and

Catholic state Minas Gerais. Together with Rio and São Paulo, Minas forms the economic powerhouse of Brazil, but it is as different to both cities as Ibiza is to Ireland. There are no boom towns or beaches – but there are steam trains, puffing between steep-hilled mountain towns where children play street cricket in front of rococo churches. And above all there is history, thick with romantic stories of the gold rush, of crushed revolutionaries, crippled artists, powerful potentate presidents, of Pelé. Nascimento's music is Minas Gerais in song – sweet and sorrowful, subtle and deeply sensitive, joyful, sad and filled with story.

Nascimento's mother was a former chorister who had sung in a choir conducted by Heitor Villa-Lobos. "There was always music of all kinds in my home," he remembers. "When I was six I fell in love with the piano. But we had no money – so my granny gave me the nearest thing – an accordion, and I used it to accompany my mother singing at church. It was very simple and had no semitones, so I had to use my voice to fill in the gaps in the scales. I also remember one day the postman came to the door with a parcel whilst my mum was out. It was a guitar and when my mother got home I didn't tell her it had arrived – it became the only thing I've ever stolen. I spent ages trying to learn how to play the music I heard in my head on that guitar. And then one day I called my mum into my room to hear me play and she was so overwhelmed and overjoyed she never got angry about the theft."

When he reached his early teens Nascimento and his neighbour Wagner Tiso formed a band. They'd travel around the local towns and villages playing cover versions (a period of his life remembered in his song 'Nos Bailes da Vida'): "In those days we couldn't record music and we'd just have to memorise the songs we heard on the radio and think up our own harmony. When we eventually started playing in Belo Horizonte, I was shocked to discover I had the harmonies all wrong. I thought I'd have to begin all over again. But then a professional musician told me 'No! Don't change anything. What you're doing is completely new and original.'"

But Nascimento was terribly shy and lacking in confidence. Then during a *candomblé* ceremony, he had a vision which changed his life: "A spirit told me not to think of turning my back on music – of running away. The spirit said 'in three months time something incredible will happen to you. Many people are going to depend on you.'" Three months later he



A young Nascimento, pictured below with Fernando Brant and Oscar Araiz



During a *candomblé* ceremony, he had a vision which changed his life: "A spirit told me not to think of turning my back on music"

entered and won a major music competition with his song 'Travessia' which led to artists like Elis Regina recording his music, and subsequently to a recording contract.

Nascimento went on to produce a series of records that were as important and innovative to Brazilian music as *bossa nova* had been in the 50s or *tropicalia* at the turn of the 60s. His Minas albums – recorded in the early to mid-70s with a coterie of old musical friends from Três Pontas and Belo Horizonte – brought a completely new sound to Latin American music. They were traditional, yet not confined to a tradition – based on harmony, texture and melody more than rhythm. And they were driven by narratives that extended from the personal to the political, expressing an identification and solidarity with Brazil's poor, black and marginalised that was completely new. The musical sophistication brought him to the attention of the US jazz elite like Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock, who invited Nascimento to perform on a series of their albums. And the political awareness made him a key figure in the *nueva canción* movement, along with Mercedes Sosa and Pablo Milanés. Since then, he has consolidated his place as a giant of 20th century music revered by millions. ●

Milton Nascimento performs with the Jobim Trio on November 20 at the Royal Festival Hall as part of the London Jazz Festival

## BEST...

### ...ALBUMS



**Clube da Esquina (EMI Hemisphere, 1972; reissued 1994)**  
One of the great seminal albums of Brazilian music. A hauntingly beautiful selection of melodies, like 'Cais', with rich harmonies and jaw-dropping singing.



**Minas (EMI, 1975)**  
At times uplifting and inspiring, with dark, difficult songs like 'Trastevere', uplifting anthems like 'Faca Amolada', and lyrical tracks of astounding beauty like the national anthem of Minas Gerais – 'Minas'.



**Sentinela (Polygram, 1980)**  
An astonishing mix of the spiritual and political, produced at the height of the dictatorship. This *nueva canción's* plea on behalf of the oppressed is expressed through a series of stunning songs that together are 'a declaration to life that begins with our friends and shared experiences and continues daily'.



**Txai (Sony, 1990)**  
Nascimento's hymn and commitment to Brazil's indigenous and forest people recorded shortly after the murder of Chico Mendes with the participation of various indigenous communities. *Txai* means 'the other half of me' in Kaxinawa Amazon language.



**Pietà (Warner Jazz, 2003)**  
Nascimento's best album for a decade is a loving tribute to his adoptive mother Lilia, recalling his childhood in Minas. The first recording to feature the voice of Maria Rita, whose mother Elis Regina launched Nascimento's career.

### ...AVOIDED



**Angelus (Warner, 1993)**  
Moments of sheer beauty – like 'Clube da Esquina 2' – peppered with the mundane and unmemorable songs, like the bland 'Only a Dream in Rio' with James Taylor.

## LIKE MILTON NASCIMENTO? THEN TRY... WAGNER TISO

**Coração de Estudante (1985)**



From Nascimento's childhood musical friend and co-founder of the Clube da Esquina (the corner club where a group of Minas Gerais' musicians gathered together in Belo Horizonte). Other members of the Clube with decent solo albums include Lô Borges, Beto Guedes, Toninho Horta, Flávio Venturini and Ronaldo Bastos.

